

From Toe Shoes To Papes

by Copper

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 "I'm sorry Jessie, but we can't afford to keep you with the New York City Ballet. You stayed as long as you could, and your ankle has healed, but it's not as strong as it once was."

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 With a sympathetic expression on his face, Mr. Chargliere led her to the door and closed it behind her. She turned to face the door, thinking that maybe she could earn her keep if she could get back inside. As she pounded on the door, almost in tears, she realized that it was over. They didn't want her and all there was left to do was leave. She had no purpose anymore. The only thing she knew how to do was dance, but that wouldn't help her on the streets of Manhattan. As a tear rolled down her cheek, she forced herself to stop crying.

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 "There's nothing worth spilling tears about. There've been worse things than this," she told herself. As she made her way to the nearest boarding house, all her memories that she had blocked out for so long came rushing back.

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>
 She had been at a dance lesson with Madame Trilnovra when she heard a commotion in the lobby. Her curiosity got the best of her, even though Madame had told her stay where she was, and she followed Madame, hiding in the shadows to stay concealed. She could not hear what they were saying - they were talking too low and her hearing wasn't that great, but she was able to read their lips. She couldn't make out most of what was being said because it was in hushed whispers, but she did read fire and her parents names. Madame Trilnovra let out a gasp and Jessie realized what happened. Her family had been killed in a fire. She went numb with emotion and forced herself not to cry. Madame Trilnovra saw her and ran to her, tears streaming down her face. Jessie felt the arms envelope her, but she made no attempt to respond. Her arms hung by her side lifelessly, she was in shock.

>
 "Excuse me ma'am. Buy me last pape?" was heard after a tap on her arm. Jessie looked around, her trance having been broken. An adorable little boy who couldn't have been more than eight stood in front of her.

>
 "Oh, um, sure," Jessie said as she fumbled for a coin. He's awfully well sounding for a newsie, she thought to herself. "What's your name kid?" she asked.

>
 "Les, ma'am."

>
 "Les?"

>
 "Yeah."

>
 He looked around with a worried look. He didn't want to get caught by one of the Delanceys. She sensed his nervousness, thanked him and went off on her way.

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> "Look, Jessie, you're eleven, it's time for you to find some work!" said Madame Trilnovra. "It's been six years since you came to live with me, and God knows we could use the money!"

> "But I don't wanna leave! I wanna stay here with you, and dance!" replied a stubborn Jessie.

> "You can still dance though! You've wrapped yourself up in dancing since your parents died, but you've never had the chance to show your talent. That's why I set up an audition for you with the New York City Ballet," was Madame's calm response. Jessie, who had been arguing futilely for the past few minutes abruptly stopped.

> "Serious?! Oh my God, oh my, oh, this is what I've always dreamed of!"

> "I know. And seriously. You were not tutored for six years for nothing!" With a smile that shone so brightly, Jessie's sky blue eyes sparkled with delight and her dark strawberry blond curls cascaded down her back. She could hardly believe her luck.

> When she went to her audition the next week, she kissed Madame good-bye. She hadn't been feeling well lately, and Jessie told her to get better by the time she got home. As she left, she felt lighter than air and was bursting with anxiety. Once on stage however, all her thoughts floated away. Her lithe and slender body performed the steps with ease, soaring through the air with the impression of a graceful bird flying. The judges couldn't believe their eyes - in front of them was a slightly hearing impaired girl who was naturally attuned to the music and performed the steps flawlessly, with pure joy. She danced with the tempo, not to it. Her talent was incredible and she was instantly accepted.

> She ran all the way home and up the stairs to their small apartment.

> "Madame Trilnovra, Madame Trilnovra, I made it!" she exclaimed. She heard no sound and made her way to the bedroom. Before she saw her, she knew that Death had claimed her. As she had six years ago, she stood rigid and numb. The following day, she and her belongings moved to the boardinghouse for the dancers, her new home.

> The company treated her well. Within three years, she was the prima ballerina. Jessie never let anyone get close to her although many tried. She grew more and more stunning with age, but she did not realize it. She threw herself into her dancing with a passion and gave off an air that said she was not to be bothered. The night before her sixteenth birthday, she was performing in Giselle as the lead. For the finale, she was to perform ten difficult turns in a sequence. It was an ordinary thing to her, but as she went to turn, the board in the floor cracked and her ankle wobbled. She fell to the ground with a resounding crack and broke her ankle. Jessie's life was to forever change.

> The company allowed her to stay until she completely healed, but

she was still bitter. Which brought her back to modern times and her present day homeless and jobless situation.

> As she remembered her problems, she cursed her bad luck. What was she going to do? Then she remembered the paper in her hands and an idea came to mind. She always wondered what being a newsie would be like. Granted, she'd have to dress like a guy but her figure wouldn't be too hard to conceal. She started getting excited but told herself to calm down. She'll start tomorrow, but she can't reveal who she really is unless she wants to create bigger problems.

> "So tomorrow, I become Jesse the newsie. Ain't nobody gonna mess wit me," she said to herself trying out her newly adopted accent. It satisfied her and she walked to the local girls' boardinghouse to dream of the days to come.

> * * *
 As the sun rose higher into the delicately painted sky, two blazing azure blue eyes peered from behind the wall. She knew the newsies would be coming soon, so she wanted to get her papes as quickly as she could. She had a slight feeling of nervousness, but she pushed it to the back of her mind. If she let her guard down, she would surely find trouble. Jessie turned the corner and took long graceful strides to the gate where she knew the newspapers were sold. No one was there, she was the first one. Fifteen minutes later, she heard a loud commotion. The newsies had arrived.

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 She waited patiently for the window to open. She thought she heard someone say something to her, but she disregarded it.

>
 "Whaddya think yer doin'?" repeated Cowboy. No answer.

Racetrack snickered. "Ya t'ink dat's funny?" asked Cowboy, giving Race a dirty look. "Watch dis."

>
 He tapped the new kid on the shoulder. Before he could ask him what he thought he was doing, Jessie spun around and snapped, "What?" with a clearly annoyed expression. Cowboy found himself looking into an extremely blue pair of eyes and a pale face with a delicate smattering of freckles. Great, competition from a pretty boy, he thought. Then he remembered what he was originally going to do and asked him, "Whaddya t'ink yer doin'?"

>
 "Whatcha mean?"

>
 "Everyone knows dat Cowboy gets his papes first and uh, you ain't Cowboy." Jack snickered to his friends but was silenced when he met the kid's steely gaze. He was obviously less than interested in what Jack had to say. Sorta like Davey when they first met.

>
 "Lemme guess. Yer Cowboy," replied Jessie before turning her back on him once more. He stood there, gaping in amazement at the nerve and attitude of the kid. No one had ever dared talk back to him, Jack Kelly! As he stood there in shock, Race asked, "Well, ain't youse gonna do sumtin' bout dat?" and brought him back to reality.

>
 "Yeah. Yeah I am." With a weird look in his eyes, he tapped Jessie's shoulder again, and when she turned around, the first thing she felt was a blow to the stomach. Without thinking, she automatically started landing blows. A minute later, she walked off with a hundred papes, leaving the newsies to sort their confusion out.

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> As she walked away from the gate, she realized that her subconscious was leading her back to Lincoln Center. "No," she scolded herself. "That was part of an old life. I'm a newsie now." She turned around and made her way to SoHo. There, she wouldn't meet anyone she knew. She found a nice selling spot by a cafe, and began her salespitch.

> "Extry, extry, read all about it! Scandal rocks Presidency When Love Notes Found in Desk!" So the real headline read "Former

President's Blank Stationary found in White House Desk." No one would buy that pape! Several hours later, all her papes were sold. She walked back to the distribution center and saw a restaurant nearby, called Tibby's. She figured she could take her lunch break there until the afternoon edition came out. As Jessie sat down in a corner booth, she saw several newsies enter out of the corner of her eye.

> "Oh great," she inwardly groaned. Racetrack saw her, hit Mush and Kid Blink and sauntered towards her table.

> "Youse gots guts kid. Ain't nobody done dat to Jacky-boy."

> "Yeah, well looks like I's did. Ya got a problem wit dat?" she threatened, her eyes flashing.

> "Naw. Just neva seen such a scrawny kid take on Cowbnoy. What's yer name kid?"

> "Jesse, if ya gots to know." And with that, she focused her attention on the food before her, making known that his presence was not wanted.

> "Well, if youse be needin' a place t'stay, dere's da lodginghouse. It's betta dan da streets, but you gotta pay seven cents a night but it's free the first night. It's around da corner, just so ya know. Don't let Jacky-boy see ya dough!" With a smirk on his face, Racetrack left and went to sit with the others.

> Jessie turned back to her food, but was too distracted by what Race had said. She had never intended on staying at a lodginghouse with the other newsies, but she realized that if she didn't, they would suspect something. With a sigh, she paid for her meal and left.

> * * *
 The cool summer breeze blew against Jessie's neck, sending a slight chill down her spine. She shivered and turned her head by instinct when the sunset caught her eye. She deftly and swiftly climbed the fire escape to the roof of one of the tenements. She watched the sky go from an azulean blue color to mauve to the color of a midnight sky. As she marveled at all of Earth's glory, she wondered what kind of supreme being would allow for all this madness and injustice and chaos in such a beautiful place. She pondered this for a couple of minutes before deciding that natural beauty and all of the world's problems balance each other out. She wished she had someone to talk to and said as much, but instantly regretted it.

>
 "Don't be getting soft, Jessie. Everytime you trusted someone, they go off and die. You've done fine on your own before. Why change it now?" She looked back up to the sky and was reminded of an old rhyme she used to recite every night:

> Starlight, starbright
 First star I see tonight

> Wish I may, wish I might
 Have the wish I wish tonight.

> "Well, it's not like it'll come true, so just for the hell of it..." At that, she made her wish. She walked back to the fire escape and just as fast as she climbed up, she climbed down. With her head lost in the clouds, she somehow got herself to the lodginghouse, where she reminded herself of what she was to do. It was time to become Jesse again, and she pushed open the door.

> The first thing she saw when she walked in was an old man surrounded by some of the younger newsies. He pretended to yell at them, but she could see the love and affection in his eyes. As if he sensed her presence, he looked up to see a skinny kid with freckles and big blue eyes. She quickly averted her eyes, pretending to be interested in the plain room itself, but Kloppman had already seen her. He disentangled himself from the little boys who were climbing all over him and made his way over to her. Jessie continued to look around, keeping watch on the approaching man from the corner of her

eye. She tensed up by natural instinct and was wary of him. She sensed his presence next to her, but was in no way prepared for what would happen next.

> "It'll be nice to have a girl around again," he whispered with a warm, welcoming smile. She looked at him with a questioning glance. "What makes you think I'm a girl?" she asked.

> "Yer too graceful to be a boy. Besides, it'll do you good to be around them. They could stand to learn a few lessons," he said with a wink and left her to herself.

> "Good Jess, real good. Someone knows you're not a guy. Be more careful, will ya?" she scolded herself. She made her way to the staircase, dreading what was going to happen when she reached the bunkroom. At the top of the stairs was a big room with numerous bunkbeds. She could faintly make out the shadows of several boys playing cards. They were laughing and she envied them for a minute. She then snapped back to reality and as quietly as she could, tip-toed to the opposite end of the room. She made it all the way to a bed at the very end before she heard Racetrack say loudly, "Hey! Who's dat?"

> Damnit. She turned around slowly and said, "Whaddya want now?"

> "Nuttin. We just figured dat we'd give youse a proper welcomes."

> "Wells, I's be needin no proper welcomes. Bye." She turned around again and left a confused Racetrack staring at her.

> "What da hell's his problem?" he muttered to himself as he walked back to the others.

> Jessie sat on the bed, fully realizing how exhausted her body was. She laid her head back onto the pillow and stretched out, walking around Manhattan was more strenuous than dancing, she had discovered. She closed her eyes and instantly fell asleep.

> * * *
 Jack walked in after seeing Medda's newest show, and he was in an extremely good mood. He walked up the stairs, followed by Kid Blink, Mush and Davey. David had gone to the show and didn't want to wake everyone at home up, so he had decided to stay at the boardinghouse. They made their way over to their usual beds, laughing and cracking jokes loudly. Through it all, Jessie slept soundly. Jack turned to look at his bed and almost didn't realize someone was in his bed. He took a closer look and saw that it was the obnoxious kid from before.

>
 "What da hell is dat kid doin' heah?!" he yelled.

>
 "Jack, Jack, calm down. See uh, I felt bad for 'im. So I's told him bout da lodginghouse. When he actually showed up, we were all surprised. We didn't know dat he was gonna take yer bed!" explained Racetrack.

>
 With an angry glance at Racetrack, he poked Jessie, waking her up. She opened her eyes and was still experiencing the effects of her deep slumber, when she turned and saw Jack standing there with a murderous look. She instinctively reached up to make sure that her hat still concealed her long hair. It did. She then sat up and returned Jack's glare.

>
 "Now, whadya want? Ever heah of leavin' a guy alone?" she asked.

>
 "Yer in my bed. Out," he stated.

>
 "Ooh, soo sorry," said Jessie, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Let me get up immediately, yer highness. Make way for the king, right yer highness? Anythin' else yer highness?" As she walked away, her blue eyes were as dark as the midnight sky, shooting daggers at Jack. She found another bed, away from Jack and laid in bed staring up at the ceiling, contemplating things. She was so tired that as

sleep overcame her, she forgot all her thoughts. Before long, she felt someone tapping on he shoulder. Oh God, not again, she groaned. As she opened her eyes, she saw Kloppman standing over her.

>
 "C'mon girllie, ya gotta wash up and all before the others wake up," he whispered.

> "Oh. Thanks fer wakin' me up," she replied awkwardly. She had never been good at expressing her gratitude. She walked to the bathrooms, washed her face and after quickly making sure the others were still asleep, she let her hair come loose to wash it and put it back up under her hat. She didn't see Davey looking at her with a stunned expression. Well, I'll be he thought. There was something about hi-her that wasn't right. And now I know why. Well whatever your name is, you secret is safe with me. He turned over and went back to sleep.

> Jessie had finished using the bathroom's facilities and quickly made her way out of the lodginghouse. She walked out and felt the early morning breeze blowing against her bare neck. A slight shiver went down her spine. She found a pretty garden; though small, it was a perfect place to sit and think, which was one of her favorite things to do. She continued walking and found a deserted alley. No one was around although she knew that the earliest merchants would be setting up now. She also knew she should start heading over to the gate to get her papes.

> A short while later, she was by the gate but didn't want to repeat yesterday's performance. She hid in the shadows of the alley nearby and waited until the time was right to get her papes. She slowly let herself daydream of the places she would go and see but was brought back to reality when she heard Race murmur, "Hey, where'd da kid go? He left da lodginghouse so early, I thought he wenta try and get 'is papes before us. But he ain't heah!"

> "So? Dat's bettah!" smirked Jack. "See, now we ain't gots anyone to create problems for us. We have enough as it is." Knowing Racetrack as well as he did, he shot a warning glance in his direction. Race got the message and shut up.

> Pretty soon, they all had their papes and headed out their selling spots, shouting out headlines that were not always necessarily the truth. Jessie watched the last of them go and quickly ran to the window.

> "A hundred papes please," requested Jessie. Please? thought the man in the window. This kid ain't a newsie. Too polite. He handed over the papes and Jessie thanked him before walking away.

> It didn't take long to sell all of them, after she added a word here or there or changed the context. Before she knew it, she was back in the alley that she had discovered that morning. She had no idea how she got there, but she decided to take advantage of it. The music from her favorite ballet, the Nutcracker, started playing in her mind. She had been in it so often that she knew every tempo, chord and key. Even if she didn't celebrate Christmas, it made the holidays both special and bearable for her. The music was so enticing that without any realization of what she was doing, she began dancing, her movements flowing naturally with no concentration necessary.

> As she leaped and twirled with a passion she thought she had forgotten, she became so lost in her reverie. Davey, who had been walking with Spot (he had made one of his trips to Manhattan early that morning to discuss business) was drawn to the alley. He pulled Spot along and both of them crouched down behind boxes watching. Spot had heard of the kid before, and realized that he was the one that fought Jack. He crouched there gaping, speechless for a change.

> "That's a guy?!" he wondered out loud.

> "No. She's a girl," replied David, captured by the girl's spirit and dance ability as her hat fell off and her hair fell past her shoulders. Spot was shocked by this slight piece of information that he had just discovered.

> "You can close your mouth now," teased Davey.

> The two boys watched the vibrant, pulsing dance, that caused music to play in their minds. Her power was so entrancing, they both didn't notice the Delanceys approaching her.

> "Well, well, looks like I gots me a pretty little danca for me boith-day!" smirked Morris.

> David and Spot watched them with a wary eye, waiting to see her reaction before they did anything. Jessie stopped abruptly and turned to face Morris.

> "You? A danca? Not possible. Maybe on da streets," retorted Jessie.

> "Oh, is dat wheres dey are? Den where are we?" taunted Oscar, sidling up to her. Before he had another chance to do something, she kicked him hard, causing him to double over. Morris went after her, but she stepped to the side, letting him run into Oscar. David and Spot threw several boxes on them, before grabbing Jessie and making a break for it.

> They ran several blocks before Jessie stopped shortly. "I didn't need yer help."

> "Don't be a joik," snapped Spot. "They woulda hoit ya."

> "I cin take care of meself," replied Jessie.

> "Not with those two," stated David. "I'll make you a deal. Stay with us and we won't tell you're a girl." He knew he had her trapped. If she refused, she'd be kicked out and would have to resort to other means. She'd have to go along with them.

> * * *
 As they walked back, David and Spot continuously tried to make conversation with her.
>
 "Where'd ya loirn ta dance like dat?" asked Spot. Jessie kept looking straight ahead, walking at a brisk pace. "I's said, where'd ya loirn to dance like dat?" After another moment of silence, he snapped, "Whatsa matter wit ya goil?!"
>
 David could see Spot's temper flaring and quickly pulled Spot to the side. "She's a girl Spot, and an angry one at that! She doesn't know who you are yet, but give her some time. She's new."

>
 Spot's blue gray eyes flashed as he turned to look at David. Coolly, he said, "Fine." They turned back to where Jessie was, but she had disappeared.

>
 "Great," muttered David under his breath. They quickly walked back to the lodginghouse, hoping that she had gone there.

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> Jessie walked alone in contemplative thought, wondering if they'd keep to their end of the deal, even though she had left them. Somehow, she found herself in front of the lodginghouse once more. It's now or never she thought. Just as she went to push the door open, she found herself staring at Racetrack, standing where the door had been a minute ago.

> "Oh. You again," Racetrack mumbled. He awkwardly made his way past her. Jessie looked straight ahead, trying to forget the sadness she had seen in his eyes.

> "All he's ever done is try to be nice to you. Why do you treat him...us so badly?" said a voice out of nowhere.

> She whirled around, caught back in the middle of reality, where David stood with a questioning look.

> "Ain'tcha supposed to be wit Spot?" she asked, trying to change the

subject.

> "He went back to Brooklyn. Why won't you give us a chance though?"

> She looked into his eyes and saw a questioning and confused expression. She realized that she had been treating them badly, especially Racetrack, when they'd only tried to help her out. "Um, excuse me please. Racetrack, wait!"

> He turned around. Now what, he thought to himself.

> "I uh, just wanted to say thanks. I've been treating you kinda mean when youse was only trying to help...Sorry." She walked back to David, leaving Race standing there with the most bewildered expression. What da hell was dat?!

> "Happy now?" she asked David.

> "Very. Now you just have to eventually tell them you're not a guy."

> "Why?! They'se too dumb to figure it out. They'se newsies!" Jessie snapped. She saw David's eyes flash and realized she had gone too far.

> "Oh, of course. If you're a newsie, you must be dumb! No such thing as a smart newsie! We can't have anyone smart come in and disrupt our nice little idiotic clan, right?" counterattacked David.

> "Wait! That's not what I-"

> "Goodbye." He walked in and shut the door, fuming at her outburst. Great Jess. Mess up something that could have kept you off the streets. She took a walk to Central Park, trying to clear her mind. Finally, she knew what she had to do. She walked back and bumped into David. He glared at her before attempting to walk off.

> "Wait, please. I need to talk to you." Something told David to listen to her, so he reluctantly followed her to a bench in the park. Although it was getting dark and they should be heading back, he didn't object. "Ok. My whole life, I've put up a wall to anyone who tries to get close to me. There's a reason for that." She proceeded to tell him her story and at the end just sat there. She couldn't cry anymore, she had shed enough tears. "So that's why I've treated everyone so horribly. I just want to make a clean start."

> "I...I don't know what to say."

> "Then don't say anything. I just wanted you to know why I've been such a jerk and that I'm sorry about what I said. Things are hard for everyone and I've only been making it harder. I'd understand if you never want anything to do with me after this, so I'll just get my things and go." She stood up to walk away but David said, "Hold on." She looked at him in surprise and heard him say, "We'd still want you around. Just lose the attitude. I'm the only walkin' mouth allowed."

> Jessie could only grin.

> "And uh, tell them who you are. They'll appreciate it. You'd rather them find out from you than they from themselves, wouldn't you?" Jessie's grin became a tight lipped expression. She tensed up, thinking of the possible consequences, fearing the worst.

> "Don't worry. They're smarter than that. Nicer too," comforted David. Jessie managed a slight smile. They headed back to the lodginghouse and Jessie felt like it was her death march.

> "Hey, c'mon! Cheer up! It won't be that bad! Trust me." Still, as she marched on, butterflies flew around her stomach and she felt more nervous than she'd ever felt before. Finally, they'd reached the moment of truth. Doomsday. She took a deep breath and walked in.

> * * *
 "Oh, lookie here. Da kid came back!" remarked Jack. His voice was undeniably sarcastic.

>
 "Yeah, I's back. And I's got sumtin' ta tell youse all." She took another deep breath, looked at David for moral support and with a flash of her hand, she pulled her hat off, letting her hair fall loose, past her shoulders.

>
 "You-youse be a goil!" exclaimed Racetrack. Jack couldn't say anything-he had just realized that a girl had given him his shiner which was still slightly visible. All the others came to that conclusion and surrounded Jessie and Jack who seemed to be involved in a staredown contest. Finally, Jack relented.

>
 "Normallys, I wouldn't do dis. But you're pretty, and a good fighta." He paused and Jessie felt a terrifying endless pit in her stomach. "Welcome to da newsies." He smiles and she stood there in shock. Davey was right. She had been worried for nothing.

>
 "But first, you needs a newsie name." With a flick of his finger, he motioned the others to surround him as if in a huddle. After a few moments of hushed whispering, they turned back to face her.

>
 "We name you..." Race imitated a drumroll, "Coppah!" announced Jack.

>
 "How ya doin' Coppah?" asked Blink

>
 "Very well, t'ank youse," replied a happy and relieved Copper. She looked over at Davey, hoping he could hear her silent thanks.

>
 "Ok. Now dere's a new show over at Medda's and she's gots ta meet da newest newsie." With a grin, he told Copper, "You'll like her."

>
 Copper smiled, and for the first time, she felt like she belonged.

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 * * *

> A short while later, as dusk became evening, Jack opened the door and held it open for.

> "Oh. Thanks," she said politely. He led her and the others to a box in the balcony that had been sectioned off for them. They had a great view of the stage when the curtain opened, revealing a pretty woman with red ringlets and a tight fitting purple dress. She put on a great show and Copper looked around to see every single newsie in a trance. She chuckled to herself and then turned back to the show. At the end, all the others stood up for a standing ovation, and she sat there clapping when Jack pulled her up.

> "C'mon. We gotta get to Medda." He made his way through the crowd with Copper close behind, led her into the lobby and through a hidden door. They walked a bit until they came to a small room with a staircase leading to the stage. Medda came down the stairs not a moment later, spotted Jack and exclaimed, "Kelly! Who'd you bring me today?!"

> "This here's Coppah. She's new. Figured I's let you two talk. She's hadda rough time lately," and with a wink and smile at Copper, he left. She was still a little amazed at the events of the day and when Medda offered her something to drink, she gladly accepted.

> She followed Medda silently to her kitchen. Surprisingly, her apartment was not as osentatious and frothy as her costumes. Medda poured some juice into a glass for Copper, brought it over to the table and sat across from her. As they talked, Copper found her a very likeable person and it was easy to talk to her. Before she knew it, she was spilling her guts, as Medda tsked with a sympathetic tongue.

> "Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry. But you have the newsies now, and they'll take good care of you. Now you said you used to dance for the ballet...Can you still dance?"

> "Yes..." Copper said slowly. "Why?"

> "I've been looking for something out of the ordinary to add to my show. A little culture, not just vaudeville. You'd be paid of course, 35% of profits at the beginning and we'll see how it goes. Of course, you could still be a newsie. Would you be willing to?"

> Copper sat there in amazement. In one day, so many blessings had come her way and she wasn't sure if she was dreaming or not. Dance had always been her life, but now she had the newsies too.

> "Of course!" she exclaimed.

> "Great! Then tommorrow, be here at 1:30. You can work out the choreography and music and everything. Tom'll be here to play the piano. If you want the orchestra, just tell me. Ok? Oh-and don't tell the boys. Let them be surprised." She smiled and Copper was tremendously happy.

> "Oh wait...I don't have any dance clothes or shoes."

> "Well then we'll go shopping tommorrow."

> "How do I not tell the others though?"

> "Tell them I wanted you to help with my clothes and hair." They smiled at each other and Copper stood up to leave. Medda called for Jack who had been hanging around on stage, pretending he was a cowboy, galloping around on an imaginary horse. When Copper saw his antics, she could hardly keep from laughing. He saw them laughing and stopped, blushing furiously.

> "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone!" teased Copper. Jack gave Medda a peck on the cheek and they exchanged their goodbyes. Jack led Copper out of the theater, held open the door for her and followed her onto the sidewalk.

> "Thanks," Copper said softly. They walked in the silence of the cool evening for a while before Jack's curiosity got the best of him.

> "So what were you two talkin' about?" asked Jack.

> "Nothin' really. She just wants me to help out after I sell da papes."

> "Oh."

> They continued walking on in silence. They reached the lodginghouse and reached for the door at the same time. As their hands touched, Copper felt her cheeks burning. Stop it, she chided herself. She pulled the door open and said mockingly of the wealthy, "After you, my dear."

> Jack gave her a startled look but relaxed when she grinned. "No, after you, my dear."

> "Oh, but I insist!"

> Racetrack, who had been watching the scene unfold from the window yelled down to them, "Wouldya two just come in already?!"

> They looked at each other and laughed before walking in while Racetrack decided that they were going to end up together.

> * * *
 The days had flown by, Copper danced in secret at practices while her relationship with Jack was developing slowly. They teased each other and talked a lot but that was it. Anyone could see how much they liked each other but they were too proud to admit it. Davey had become her best friend, and she was able to tell him almost anything. But some things she just kept to herself. No one knew about her dancing or how much she liked Jack. But Medda knew. She could see it in her eyes. She figured that their relationship would never get anywhere unless she helped move it along.

>
 "Copper, I think you're ready." Copper looked at Medda in surprise.

>
 "Are you sure?"

>
 "Positive. Tommorrow night, you begin. Tell the boys that there's a new show to see and I expect them all there."

>
 "Ohmigosh, Medda you're the best!" She hugged Medda with a

happiness she had long since forgotten. Medda was smiling, herself.

>
 As usual, one of the newsies was there to meet her. They came every night to walk Copper home, but mainly to see Medda. Tonight, Racetrack had the honor of escorting her.

>
 "Well, someone's in a good mood tonight!" he teased.

>
 "Copper smiled and went back into her daydream. As they walked on, the Delanceys appeared unfortunately.

>
 "Hey, it's da danca!" exclaimed Morris. "How ya doin?! I got a nice surprise for ya...Come here and I'll show you it..." he leered.

>
 Copper, thoroughly disgusted, took her knee and hit him where she knew it would hurt. As he groaned and yelled at her, she calmly grabbed a brick she found in the corner and hit him with it. He fell over unconscious and Race looked at her in surprise.

>
 "I didn't know you could do that."

>
 "Me neither," shrugged Copper.

>
 Racetrack had a bit of a shiner from fighting Oscar, but he had left the lousy bum in the alley with his brother. When they reached the lodginghouse, it wasn't long before everyone knew what had happened. They cheered for her and warned her to be careful.

>
 "With dose Delanceys, ya never know what deys gonna do." It was then Copper remembered her news of the performance tommorrow night.

>
 "Hey guys! Guys!! Blink, shut up!" That got their attention.

"Medda has a new show starting tommorrow night and she wants all of youse there. Why, I don't know but she does," she announced. The guys cheered-they were getting tired of playing cards every night.

>
 It was getting late and Copper figured she should get in some rest before her big day tommorrow. She rested her head on the pillow, but try as she might, she couldn't fall asleep and it was annoying her. She wanted to sleep but something was keeping her up. Then she heard a moan. She looked around and realized that it was Jack. She laughed inwardly and then heard something else.

>
 "Coppah," Jack said dreamily. She was caught off-guard and then smiled happily, settling down to sleep.

>
 * * *

> The next morning, she rose bright and early. She went to her favorite little garden and sat there for contemplation. As if in a trance, she somehow arrived at the distribution center in time to get her papes and walked off to sell them, floating lighter than air. Today is gonna be perfect, she thought. Nothing can go wrong.

> Somehow the time passed and it was time to go to Medda's. She told the guys she'd see them later and walked off. The streets were full of looming shadows popping out of every corner but she marched on. Finally, she saw the alley where the back door was situated. She walked through the alley, almost there when a fist popped out of nowhere and hit her eye. With her other eye, she was able to make out the distinct shadows of the ever delightful Delanceys.

> "This is just a preview of what's to come," whispered Morris, as she felt a chill go down her spine. As they ran off chuckling, she carefully touched her sore eye and realized that it was going to swell up and give her a black eye. It was already sensitive to the touch and as she walked in, Medda gasped.

> "Sweetie, what happened?!"

> "Those apes, the Delanceys won't leave me alone because I won't go home with them and last time, I hurt Morris pretty bad. Don't worry bout it. Can I just get some ice?"

> "Of course. Do you still want to dance?"

> "Of course." With a determined clench of her jaw, she stormed into

the costume room, holding the ice on her eye all the meanwhile.

> Several moments later, the show was in full swing, enjoying themselves as they watched Medda's pleasing performance while Copper put on the finishing touches. Her hair was pulled up in a tight bun and she was wearing a white tutu and bodice with blue and purple thread laced through it. Her white toe shoes and the ribbons wound through and dangling from her hair completed the costume. She had put a lot of makeup on to cover her eye. She only hoped it wasn't too noticeable.

> She looked at her reflection one last time and got up from her chair. She was careful not to make any noise with her wooden toe shoes, which after years of experience was a known skill. As she made her way to the stage, she felt butterflies in her stomach as Medda shushed the audience to announce the newest act, a ballerina from the New York City Ballet. In front of a screen, the curtain opened, revealing a silhouette on the screen. As the music started up, the silhouette began dancing to the music from Coppelia, first dancing like a doll, mechanically before her motions flowed into each other and she was soaring on an endless natural high. Copper forgot the audience, her life and injustices. All she knew was her love of dancing.

> In the balcony high above, Jack gaped at the movements below as if in a trance. Davey felt a weird sense of deja vu watching the dancer and as he looked over at Jack trying to place his finger on it, it hit him like a bolt of lightning.

> "Spot..." he hissed. Spot paid no attention. In a low voice, David said his name once more.

> "What?" Spot said, clearly irritated.

> "That's Copper."

> Spot was caught off-guard. Way off-guard. He looked at her once more, then back at David. "Holy-"

> "Cow," David finished. They both stood up quietly, excusing themselves from their seats. As they made their ways to the wings, David quietly told Spot to not let her them. Medda saw the two approaching boys and softly chuckled. David walked up to her and asked, "That's Copper, isn't it?" Spot had lost his cool, gawking at the girl on the stage. Medda nodded and pointed to Jack.

> "He loves her but he doesn't realize it. It's only a matter of time before he realizes it. But he's gonna need some help to get there."

> Davey glanced at Jack, then Copper, before nodding towards Medda. He pulled Spot away and they went back to their seats, arriving just in time to see the ending of the dance. As if taking her last breath, Copper became mechanical again, moving slower and slower as the music came to an end, until finally, she sat limp with both hands by her head and her back bent over her widespread legs. As she sat motionless, the curtain closed and the theater shook with thunderous applause as they all came to their feet for a standing ovation.

> Copper walked to a beaming Medda with a smile so wide on her face, she felt like her face would crack. Her happiness seemed to overtake the soreness and pain of her eye.

> "Marvelous, my dear. Absolutely marvelous. They loved you. Tomorrow night, ok? Now go get changed, take care of that eye and I'll have one of the stagehands walk you home. It's too risky to let you go by yourself."

> Copper didn't argue and about a half-hour later, after having taken off the makeup and costume and letting her hair loose, she was ready. When she walked out of the dressing room and saw the two brawny and

bulky men Medda had sent her to keep her safe, she laughed.

> The whole way home, all she could think about was the magic of the night. It had truly been a magical experience, one she would never forget. When she reached the house, she thanked them both and waltzed into the lobby, humming dreamily and surprising Kloppman.

> "I-I thought you went to Medda's new show. With the others," Kloppman questioned.

> "Oh, I did. As a matter of fact Kloppey, I was in it!" With a peck on the cheek, she told him not to tell the boys and merrily danced her way to the bunkroom.

> A stunned Kloppman muttered, "Well I'll be," before chuckling to himself.

> * * *
 When the others came back, they all found Copper on her bed, reading one of the books she had taken from the lodginghouse's "library". Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Jack's expression as he entered and smiled to herself, not noticing a pair of watchful eyes belonging to Davey. Mush saw her and asked her, "Where were you?! Medda's new show is betta dan befo'!"
> "Yeah!" agreed Blink.

> "Really? Tell me about it!" requested Copper, her eyes sparkling and dancing with delight. David saw her happiness and chortled quietly. As the boys gathered around, Race began telling of the night's performance. Halfway through the tale of the mysterious dancer, Spot interrupted, "She should know, she was dere."

> Oh no thought David. He's gonna mess it all up. Copper sat there nervously, trying not to let it show.

> "Whaddya talkin' bout? No she wasn't. I woulda seen her," said Jack, throwing a pillow at Spot. The others followed suit, causing Spot to duck and dodge the flying feathery missiles targeting him.

> "Hey!" he snapped, running his fingers through his hair. "Nobody does that to da famous Spot Conlon and gets away wit it!"

> "Oh, is dat so?" teased Jack. "Anyways, what did you mean before?"

> "Da dancer yer so infatuated with is none odder dan her," pointing at Copper.

> The boys eventually realized what he meant and broke into excited chattering, while a quiet Jack stared at Copper, who was trying hard not to cry.

> "Coppah?" he asked. She nodded in affirmation, before running out in tears.

> "How'd ya know?" asked Jack quietly.

> "Me 'n Davey saw 'er dance befo' and we checked it out tonight."

> Jack turned to face an unhappy David. "You knew too?" Davey could only nod. Jack sat back, taking it all in.

> "Um, I don't mean to interrupt, but did anyone else notice her shiner?" They boys had all been in such high spirits, they weren't noticing much at all today.

> "Morris. It's gotta be Morris," declared Race. They all remembered hearing of their run-in.

> "All right, everyone team up. Spot 'n Davey, yer wit me." They all shuffled out of the lodginghouse to search for Copper.

> * * *
 Meanwhile, in an alley not too far away, harsh blows landed on various parts of Copper's body. She had given up before, too tired and depressed to fight back. She just wanted to die. The Delanceys were certainly helping her get there faster.
>
 * * *
> As Jack, Davey and Spot searched for her, Davey and Spot argued.

> "If you hadn't said anything, she'd have been fine!"

> "Well, dey would've found out anyway!"

> "Yeah, from her when she was ready!"

> "Shut up!" Spot and David looked at Jack in surprise. "I hear something." The other two heard it too. They ran around the corner to find the Delanceys beating Copper mercilessly. Within seconds, her beatings ended and the Delanceys' had just begun.

> When it was over, they all looked over to where Copper lay unconscious. Carefully, they picked her up and carried her to her bed, cautious not to make her worse than she already was. Back at the house, Kloppman called a doctor who was extremely well known amongst the newsies for giving them needed attention at extremely affordable prices. Many of the newsies sat around her bed waiting for her to wake up, when the doctor announced she had a few cracked ribs, a broken wrist, countless bruises and scrapes and an obvious concussion.

> The next day, all the newsies but Davey and Jack headed out, they each taking turns watching Copper as the other slept. Race brought the news to Medda who cried for her before sending a huge bouquet of flowers. When Race came back, there were so many flowers in the lodginghouse, he commented that they could turn it into a greenhouse to bring in more money. It brought much needed comic relief to the exhausted caretakers.

> Another night passed by and it wasn't till the middle of the day that her eyes fluttered open. She took in her surroundings and realized where she was before seeing who was holding her hand.

> "Hey Jack," she managed to whisper.

> He looked up in surprise. "Coppah?!"

> "Yeah, dat's me."

> Almost hysterical, Jack jumped up and woke Davey up.

> "Wha-what do you want now, Les?" he moaned.

> "Davey, Coppah's up!"

> That got Davey outta bed. They both fussed over her, while she insisted she was fine, with a grin.

> Jack leaned over and whispered something which made her smile happily. She looked at him with lively eyes and nodded. David had the feeling something important happened but he wasn't sure what. Right around then the others started arriving and noticing that "Sleepin' Beauty" as they so affectionately had called her was up. They all crowded around her when Jack yelled, "Leave her alone ya bummers and lemme spend some time wit my goil!"

> Race complained, "Aww, but you've had her for two whole da-" before it hit him. Shocked, he asked, "Did 'e just say 'my goil'?!"

> Jack and Copper nodded as the newsies whooped and hollered. They made even more noise when Jack gave Copper a long passionate kiss. She was at a disadvantage because she couldn't move. Jack knew this and took advantage of that, but Copper didn't mind. Her wounds and scars would heal much more easily, being surrounded by her new family. She could only smile at what the others said, her ribs still hurt too much, but she had a feeling there would be many more days like this to come, where she can laugh and joke with them.

> Davey sensed her happiness and seemed to be able to read her thoughts as they shared a private grin before turning back to the chaos within the lodginghouse. They both knew she had finally found her home.

> <p><p>

End

file.